

The Sunday Times Magazine

August 28, 2005

Investigation

Beasts of prey

In Guatemala, women are being raped, mutilated and murdered in their thousands. Even little girls have to constantly look over their shoulders.

There is little chance of the perpetrators being caught — because often the law is right behind them. Christine Toomey investigates

There is a country where a man can escape a rape charge if he marries his victim — providing she is over the age of 12. In this country, having sex with a minor is only an offence if the girl can prove she is "honest" and did not act provocatively. Here, a battered wife can only prosecute her husband if her injuries are visible for more than 10 days. Here too it is accepted in some communities that fathers "introduce" their daughters to sex.

In this country the body of a girl barely into her teens, or a mother, or a student, can be found trussed with barbed wire, horrifically mutilated, insults carved into her flesh, raped, murdered, beheaded and dumped on a roadside. In its capital city, barely a day goes by without another corpse being found. Bodies are appearing at an average of two a day this year: 312 in the first five months, adding to the 1,500 females raped, tortured and murdered in the past four years.

This country is Guatemala, and to be a woman here is to be considered prey. Prey to murderers who know they stand little chance of being caught. Prey not just on the street, nor at night, nor in back alleys, but in their homes, outside offices, in broad daylight. In Guatemala someone has declared war on women. Someone has decreed it doesn't matter that so many are dying in grotesque circumstances. Someone has decided that if a woman or a girl is found dead she must have asked for it, she must be a prostitute, too insignificant to warrant investigation. Everyone here knows women are being murdered on a huge scale, and not by one serial killer, nor two nor even three, but by a culture. So why is this happening? Why is it being allowed to continue?

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Manuela Sachaz was no prostitute. She was a baby-sitter, newly arrived in the city to care for the 10-month-old son of a working couple. They found her

body on the floor in a pool of blood. The baby was propped up in a high chair, his breakfast still on the table in front of him. Both had been beheaded. The nanny had been raped and mutilated; her breasts and lips had been cut off, her legs slashed.

Maria Isabel Veliz was just a happy teenage girl with a part-time job in a shop. She was found lying face down on wasteland to the west of the capital. Her hands and feet had been tied with barbed wire. She had been raped and stabbed; there was a rope around her neck, her face was disfigured from being punched, her body was punctured with small holes, her hair had been cut short and all her nails had been bent back.

Nancy Peralta was a 30-year-old accountancy student who failed to return home from university. She was found stabbed 48 times; her killer or killers had tried to cut off her head.

But you have to dig deep to find the families and talk to their neighbours and friends to learn about the terrible things that are happening in this small Central American country sandwiched between Mexico and El Salvador.

Newspapers here carry a daily tally of the number of female corpses found strewn in the streets, but such discoveries are usually considered so insignificant they are relegated to a sentence or paragraph at the bottom of an inside page. Brief mention may be made of whether the woman has been scalped, tortured, decapitated, dismembered, trussed naked in barbed wire, abandoned on wasteland or, as is common, dumped in empty oil drums that serve as giant rubbish bins. Some reports might mention that "death to bitches" has been carved on the women's bodies, though there is rarely a mention of whether the woman or girl, some as young as eight or nine, has been raped. According to Dr Mario Guerra, director of Guatemala City's central morgue, the majority have. Many of the women are simply designated "XX", or "identity unknown". This is because they have often been taken far from the place where they were abducted and subjected to unimaginable tortures before being killed. It can take the women's families days, weeks or months to trace them. Many are unrecognisable and, as there is no DNA profiling here, some are never claimed and simply buried in unmarked communal graves.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

To truly understand what is happening in this country and what happened to Manuela, Maria Isabel or Nancy, you have to spend a few moments stepping back in time to the darkest days of Guatemala's 30-

year civil war. The slaughter began earlier here and lasted much longer than in El Salvador and neighbouring Nicaragua, though it escalated for similar reasons. It escalated because, in the context of the cold war, successive United States administrations felt threatened by the election of liberal and socialist governments in the region and the emergence of left-wing guerrilla insurgencies. Often secretly, they proceeded to pump massive military aid into these countries' armed forces and right-wing rebels to fight the leftists — though in the case of Guatemala, what happened was a more blatant case of protecting US corporate interests.

By the early 1950s, vast swathes of Guatemala lay in the hands of America's United Fruit Company. In 1954, when the country's left-leaning government started expropriating some of this land to distribute to the poor, the CIA, whose director had financial ties to the company, orchestrated a military coup. Land reform stopped, left-wing guerrilla groups began to form and the US-sponsored anti-insurgency campaign began. The 30-year cycle of repression that followed, reaching its bloodiest peak in the 1980s, was the most violent, though least reported, in Latin America. Large areas of the countryside were razed, their population, mostly Mayan Indian, massacred. Villagers were herded into churches and burnt, whole families sealed alive in wells. Political opponents were assassinated, women were raped before being mutilated and killed. The wombs of pregnant women were cut open and fetuses strung from trees. By the time the UN brokered a peace deal in 1996, over 200,000 had been killed, 40,000 "disappeared" and 1.3m had fled their homes, to leave the country or become internal refugees. This in a country with a population of little over 10m.

When the Catholic Church concluded in 1998 that 93% of those killed (in what were later recognised as "acts of genocide") had perished at the hands of the country's armed forces, paramilitary death squads and the police, the bishop who wrote the report was bludgeoned to death on his doorstep. Unusually, given the country's climate of almost complete impunity, three army officers were convicted of his murder.

In recognition that it was those the US had armed, and in part trained in methods of sadistic repression, who were responsible for most of the atrocities, the UN-sponsored peace deal demanded that the country's armed forces and police be reduced and reformed. It also demanded that those responsible for the worst atrocities be brought to justice. Not only did this not happen, but Efraim Rios Montt, the general accused of acts of genocide at the height of the war (charges famously dismissed by the former US president Ronald Reagan as a "bum rap"),

subsequently stood for president. Though he failed in this bid, he was eventually elected president of Congress — a position similar to the Speaker of the House. And while the army and police force were pared down, and in the case of the police their uniforms updated, the men did not change. In a land that has seen such lawless atrocity go unpunished, it is not surprising that life should be cheap. And in a land where the culture of machismo is so pronounced, it is not surprising that men have become accustomed to thinking they can murder, torture and rape women with impunity.

This is not, of course, how the police here see it. It is astonishing how quickly the police chief Mendez, in charge of a special unit set up last year to investigate the murder of women, agrees to see me. Considering his workload, you would think he was a busy man. But when I call to make an appointment I'm told he can see me at any time. The reason for this courtesy quickly becomes apparent. Not a lot seems to be going on in Mendez's office; his unit appears to be little more than window-dressing. Tucked away in a low building on the roof of the National Civil Police HQ in the heart of the capital, the office looks almost vacant; four desks sit in the far corners of the sparsely furnished room, separated by a row of filing cabinets. The only wall decoration is a large chart of the human body "to help police officers write up their reports of injuries inflicted on murder victims". There are four computers, only two of which are switched on. Apart from Mendez and his secretary, there are three other police officials in the room at the time of my visit. All sit huddled in a corner chatting and laughing throughout the interview.



CURRENT EVENTS

REPORTS

RESOURCES

MOOD

EVENTS

Home > Current events > Latin America > Guatemala : violence targeting women

SEPTEMBER 2005

AGENCE FEMME

+PAR THEMES

+PAR DATES

+PAR PAYS

LATIN
AMERICA**Guatemala : violence targeting women**

30/09/2004

Some are victims of gangs, others of domestic abuse. Many are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. More than 300 women have been killed in Guatemala since January, compared with 250 killed in all of 2003 and 184 in 2002, according to local media and the National Statistical Institute. U.N. representatives visited last year and expressed concern. Women in Guatemala and Mexico have called on the government to stop the wave of violence. Women's rights advocates blame laws that are stacked against women, especially victims of domestic violence, and a culture that lacks respect for women. Prosecutor Sandra Zayas argues the overall spike in female killings is simply a reflection of the growing violence in Guatemala, where people in small towns often take the law into their own hands and a culture of violence still persists eight years after peace accords ended 36 years of war.

Source : Associated Press



IMPRIMER



ENVOYER

les-
pénélopes

+ WOMEN'S VI
+ Solidarity-ba
economy netw

+ WSF 2005

+ ESF2004

+ WSF 2004

+ ACTIONS

+ ONLINE PET

+ TIC IN THE N

+ MEETINGS

+ EXHIBITS

+ BOOKS

+ FAVORITE S

+ ANNOUNCEM

+ THEMATIC
NEWSGROUPS

+ FRANÇAIS

+ ESPAÑOL

recherche

+ ABOUT US

+ PENELOPES

+ BULLETINS

+ WHO ARE W

+ ARCHIVES

+ YOUR SUGG

+ SUBSCRIBE

+ ADHERE

4: NOTICIAS



Foto: Juan Castillo

En el velatorio, un servicio cristiano fue ofrecido por el pastor Ezequiel García, de la iglesia evangélica Cristo Viene.

Cinco crímenes Dicen que fue masacre

Elías Salazar
★ Nuestro Diario

Ayer fueron sepultadas en el cementerio de Santa Catarina Pinula, las cinco víctimas del ataque armado ocurrido la noche del viernes en el sector 2, lote 4, manzana f, de la colonia Santa Bárbara.

Manuela de Jesús Escobar, de 49 años de edad, lloraba inconsolable la muerte de su hijo José Alfredo Pumay Escobar, de 21, pues hace sólo una semana falleció su esposo, del mismo nombre.

"Fue una masacre, ellos eran gente de bien, ninguno tenía tatuajes, no eran

LAS VÍCTIMAS



José Alfredo
Pumay



Jorge Mario
Cojón



Oswaldo
René Puac



David
Argueta



Carlos Franco
Pumay

delincuentes ni mareros", repetían los dolientes.

Quedaron heridos Ana Pumay, de 30 años; Aura Verónica Pumay, de 26; Hilda Jeanette Pumay, de 28, y Gerson Obed Mora-

les, de 20, quienes estaban en la casa y fueron alcanzados por los disparos.

De alto poder

Los criminales usaron fusiles Ak-47 y pistolas 9

milímetros.

Llegaron en un carro con vidrios polarizados y dispararon contra quienes jugaban naipes en la banqueta de la casa del lote número 4.